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WASHINGTON — Health care reform in Washington is usually a recipe for partisan division and political gridlock.

But Tuesday it inspired bipartisan comity, as a wide-ranging coalition of lawmakers and outside interest groups unveiled a new proposal they said could kick-start efforts to address the spiraling health care crisis.

Backers of the measure — aimed at helping small-business owners, farmers and other self-employed individuals — include two Missouri lawmakers from opposing parties: Reps. Russ Carnahan, D-St. Louis, and Jo Ann Emerson, R-Cape Girardeau.

"This can help break the logjam," Carnahan said at a news conference touting the measure, the Small Business Health Options Program, or SHOP Act.

He and others noted that small-business employees and the self-employed account for a large chunk of the country's 47 million uninsured. Because they don't belong to large purchasing pools, which allow insurers to spread the risk, they often face much higher premiums — as much as 20 percent more — than employees at large businesses.

The legislation would:

- Provide a tax credit to small-business owners who pay 60 percent or more of their employees' premiums.
- Encourage the creation of statewide and nationwide purchasing pools for small businesses and the self-employed.
- Reduce the ability of insurers to raise premiums for small businesses when one employee becomes seriously ill.

Former Sen. Jim Talent, R-Mo., long advocated creating larger purchasing pools for small-business employees. But his legislation always stalled, in

part because it would have allowed participating insurers to opt out of state patient protection laws. The SHOP act requires insurance plans to follow state mandates.

The measure has the support of the National Federation of Independent Business, the National Association of Realtors and the Service Employees International Union. Those three powerful interest groups have driven the health care debate in past years — usually in opposite directions.

"We were on competing sides in the last Congress, so the real story here is that we've come together now," said Jamie Gregory, a NAR lobbyist.

The bill still faces tough prospects. Lawmakers have a jam-packed legislative calendar, and little is expected to get done in such a highly charged presidential election year.

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